

Scriptural Foundations for the Pro-Life Position

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Synopsis: Too often biblical arguments for and against prolife positions are based on proof texts, often taken out of context. We will situate such positions within a more inclusive biblical perspective on how God relates to and values both individual humans and the people of God.

INTRODUCTION

A major point of contention in arguments between pro-lifers and their antagonists is the charge that pro-lifers are making a fundamentalist use of Scripture in defending their positions. The label of “fundamentalist” is often indiscriminately applied even to Catholic proliferers, mostly as an expression of contempt, because they dare to quote biblical prohibitions against killing innocent human life to argue against abortion, which is not explicitly treated in the New Testament. One has to admit that some Catholics as well as other Christians, without realizing the implications of what they are doing, simply quote convenient texts from the Bible that seem to support their pro-life point, without asking whether this was the significance of the text in its original context. This is what is meant by proof-texting. However, many Catholic and other Christians who have heard sharp criticism of pro-life proof-texting or “fundamentalism” are intimidated from appealing to Scripture at all in support of their pro-life positions out of fear of proof-texting or of misusing the Bible in some other way, or of being accused of doing so.

Nevertheless, as a professional biblical scholar myself, I want to assure ordinary lay Catholics and other Christians that the Bible does have a lot of relevant evidence to which we can appeal when presenting and defending Christian pro-life positions. I propose

an approach to Scripture which does not require every Christian to become a trained professional exegete but which can be used by anyone who takes the trouble to read the Scriptures with some carefulness and openness to them as God's revealing word to us in our lives and situations.

First, however, let us look at some of the problems regarding the use of Scripture in contemporary moral arguments, especially regarding life issues. Because I know the Catholic situation best, and because Catholic moral teachings are reputed to be the most uncompromising in rejecting abortion and other attacks on human life, my examples will be primarily from and about Catholics.

USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE REGARDING LIFE ISSUES

A serious scandal in contemporary American Catholicism are the numerous publications by professedly Catholic authors which promote moral opinions (supposedly based on Scripture) that directly contradict centuries-old Catholic moral positions, especially in sexuality and life concerns. This scandal causes even more confusion among ordinary Catholics when these notions are preached or proposed in confession or pastoral settings, or are espoused by nominally Catholic politicians to justify their promotion of legalized abortion. Non-academic believers appropriately ask how, after all these centuries, the Bible can only now be saying that it is all right to end one's own or a loved one's life when in misery, or that abortion is a woman's choice.

It is common knowledge how for decades the Bible has been a battleground over sexual and life issues in many denominations, including Catholicism, with both sides claiming support for their mutually contradictory positions. Conclusions have often been decided before Scripture was even consulted. The Bible has frequently been mined for confirmatory evidence and arguments with little attention to the context or original meaning of those passages. Both sides have resorted to proof-texting, although ethical revisionists have also introduced a new twist, a kind of "anti-proof-texting," as in arguments that all the biblical

statements which seemingly condemn homosexual behavior actually do not apply to the current understanding and phenomena.ⁱ

HISTORICAL CRITICAL RELATIVISM: BIBLICAL NORMS
AS “CULTURALLY CONDITIONED”

One of the most substantial concerns with historical critical applications of Scripture to ethical judgments relates to typical arguments that this or that statement by Paul or even by Jesus is culturally conditioned. One cannot, of course, deny the importance of being aware of historical contexts and how they influence the content or manner of biblical commands concerning moral or social issues. For example, it is self-evident that some biblical statements about slavery are culturally conditioned and related to a Greco-Roman situation which the tiny minority of Christians were helpless to change. However, this claim for the cultural conditioning and hence the relativity of moral commands and judgments in Old or New Testament continues to be expanded toward ever further revisionism of biblical and traditional social roles and moral judgments. More and more of what Paul or Jesus said is asserted to be culturally conditioned; less and less is treated as authoritative or even applicable to contemporary living. This too is a scandal or stumbling block to the faith of ordinary believers, leading to a widespread notion that social relationships and moral commands in the New Testament are for the most part irrelevant or even inappropriate for modern living.

I will argue that despite the obvious fact that every statement is to some extent culturally conditioned and related to its time and circumstances of origin, clearly the Church has treated Scripture as not just some time-bound relic witnessing to past ideals but as God’s authoritative word to every age and every culture. Much of what is authoritative in Scripture is apparent to any reasonable intelligent and literate reader and believer.

But the way that I propose using Scripture for pro-life argumentation gets beyond minute specifics, for whose arbitration

scholarship might be seen as necessary. Rather, I will propose situating individual pro-life questions like the morality of abortion within a more inclusive biblical perspective on how God relates to and values both individual humans and the people of God. I would like to refer to a biblical worldview which provides a context for deciding particular moral questions.

However, even before dealing with that overall biblical perspective about the place of humans in relation to God, to other humans, and to the rest of material creation, I want to recall briefly what Vatican II teaches about the need to interpret not only the basic and original *human* meaning of the words of Scripture, but also what *God* wanted to reveal through their words.

APPLYING AND ACTUALIZING SCRIPTURES (BEYOND HISTORICAL CRITICISM)

To move beyond historical criticism toward applying and actualizing the Scripture for our contemporary situation, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of Vatican II (DV 12), as reaffirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 111-14, insists that we must attend not only to what the human authors intended but also to what God wanted to reveal to us through their words. “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written” (CCC 111, DV 12 §3), i.e., by the Holy Spirit.

They provide three approaches for doing so: 1. “*Be especially attentive ‘to the content and unity of the whole Scripture’.*” 2. “*Read the Scripture within ‘the living Tradition of the whole church’.*” 3. “*Be attentive to the analogy of faith.*” Let us look briefly at each.

To interpret the mind of God in Scripture, one reads the particular passages within the overall context of God’s revelation, that is, within all of Scripture, as also found in the Church’s life and tradition, and within the coherence of all the truths of faith among themselves and God’s whole plan of revelation. Thus to argue on prolife issues, especially on matters like abortion which

are not explicitly treated in Scripture, we treat the passages which we do use within the entire canonical context. That is, our solution to this question has to be consistent with the overall biblical revelation about God and human beings and the created world. We don't proof-text out of context to support our contemporary ideologies.

Believing readers also read the Scripture from within the living tradition of their Church. Hence, those of us who are Catholics read and interpret the Bible specifically as Catholics. Unlike some Protestants who tend toward *sola scriptura* insistence that something has to be expressly treated in Scripture in order to be binding, Catholics read and preach from Scripture within our broader Catholic context of revelation. Thus, even though Scripture says almost nothing explicitly about abortion as such, Scripture says a lot about killing innocent human life, about how human life and children are blessings and gifts from God, and about how God has a plan for each human life from before birth, about letting little children come to Jesus, and the like. When the Scriptures are read from within the overall biblical worldview about the relationship between God, humans, and the material created world, all this biblical evidence provides a clear biblical foundation for applications to specific cases like abortion.

Further, when we read these Scripture as Catholics, the Church's rich moral tradition (handily summarized in the *CCC* and Vatican II) and explicit magisterial treatments of abortion (such as *Evangelium Vitae*, *The Gospel of Life*, abbreviated here as *EV*) can be used as a "rule of faith" in the way that the early Fathers used the creeds as criteria for whether a biblical interpretation was acceptable or heretical. Consequently, a Catholic can read what Scripture says about human life and killing and apply that to abortion with the help of moral absolutes like "one may never do evil to achieve good"; that human life is to be protected from conception (without getting sidetracked into philosophical questions like when the soul is created); that abortion is an intrinsic evil because it is taking innocent human life. Although one should not claim that all of these are explicitly *biblical*

teachings, for Catholics they are legitimate traditional helps in interpreting and applying the evidence which Scripture does provide about the meaning of human life in relation to our creator God.

The third context which Vatican II (*DV* 12) mentions for interpreting Scripture as God's word and applying it to contemporary living is the "analogy of faith," that is, how all our truths of faith and experiences of Catholic living cohere among themselves and within God's overall revealed plan of salvation. Here the pro-lifer can appeal to personal experience like that of counseling distressed women either beforehand when they are considering having an abortion, or after they have had one and are consequently suffering from post-abortion aftermath. On this level, without making exaggerated claims that these are explicitly biblical teachings, most of the evidence, experience, and arguments generated by the prolife movement and prolife thinkers and writers can be used in *applying* Scripture's foundational demand that innocent human life be respected, and its absolute prohibitions against shedding innocent human blood, to the non-biblical instance of abortion.

In fact, I recommend that when arguing from Scripture on prolife topics, Catholics use the *CCC*, which has a readable and authoritative treatment of all these and related issues, as a guide for their Catholic interpretation and application of the biblical texts which pertain to the current controversy. The Catechism is a handy first step for checking the Church's teaching on any topic, and can be bolstered if desired by consulting other authoritative prolife Church documents like *Evangelium Vitae* and *Donum Vitae*. Although in turning to Scripture our focus is more explicitly on the implications of the *Scriptures* as God's word to us, the *CCC* can provide basic boundaries for applying and interpreting those Scriptures in our prolife presentations.

On the other hand, when presenting the pro-life case to those who are not Catholics, it is helpful to keep in mind some of the following differences between especially Protestant and Catholic argumentation and the role of Scripture in each. As a fine

example of such an approach, and one which shares several prolife sympathies, let us look at Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, and compare some of his differences from the Catholic procedure noted above.ⁱⁱ

It is not surprising that some of the sharper differences in Hays's approach pertain to the use of extra-biblical warrants. For example, despite a general reluctance to allow abortion, Hays categorically denies the notions of the sacredness of human life, and the biblical relevance of rights language, denying not only "modern rights" like the right to privacy, but even the right to life. Regarding the right to life, Hays argues that life is not a right but a gift from God, which may be true of a creature vis-à-vis the Creator and before the actual existence of a particular individual human person.ⁱⁱⁱ He is reluctant to draw principles from biblical narratives and laws and to argue to conclusions from them. He is even hesitant to extend the prohibition of murder to abortion as a sub-species of killing innocent human life, in view of some Old Testament treatments of accidental miscarriages as pertaining more to property concerns than to a fetus's stated right to life (Ex. 21:22-25). In this kind of comparison to Old Testament laws for (accidental) killing of a child in the womb, he does not appear to take sufficient account of a possible New Testament development beyond Old Testament insights, which in other questions like war and peace he does not hesitate to argue much more aggressively.

However, he does acknowledge that the Septuagint translation and some rabbis and postbiblical Jewish writers introduced a distinction between a formed and unformed fetus, and applied *ius talionis* and murder laws to the killing of formed fetuses.

Regardless, it does not seem to be eisegesis to argue from the biblical evidence that once God has freely given the gift of life to a human, that as God's image that particular human now has a right to life which other humans must respect. This right to life is revealed or at least implied and protected by the stern biblical commandment against killing innocent human life (murder), which is enforced by the severity of the biblical death penalty for such murder. Without this basic foundational right to life, no other rights

can exist among humans and the weak would always be at the complete mercy of the strong. Therefore the burden of proof would seem to lie with the one who denies that such a right to life is biblical.

It is one thing to argue that humans as creatures (and sinful ones at that) have no rights claims on God their creator. That seems a reasonable consequence of the theological situation of a creature before its Creator and of the belief that our salvation comes from God's grace and by faith and is not earned by our own works. It is therefore obvious that a creature cannot make authoritative demands on its Creator. It is quite another issue to deny that the Bible promotes basic human rights among human beings, rights which do make strict demands on other humans and which are the essential foundation of all human protection and civilization and of local, national, and international law. This right to life seems to be even implied by the very commandment not to shed human blood, with its accompanying rationale, "for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6 RSV).

Closely related to this fundamental difference over whether the right to life is literally "biblical" is Hays's *failure to mention any moral absolutes* that may be applicable to the treatment of abortion. He treats the "hard case" scenario of a potential Downs Syndrome child to a forty-ish couple as a prayerful decision, which seems to imply a spiritual discernment among two permissible (because moral even if "tragic") choices, rather than as a more fundamental question whether or not this option to abort is morally permitted at all. His approach does not sound like a question of discovering what God commands in this case, nor like an application of an absolute divine command or an absolute moral principle to this decision. The fact that abortion is not explicitly and absolutely condemned in Scripture seems to provide a kind of unconscious *sola scriptura* justification, in an argument from silence, for treating abortion as something much more contingent upon circumstances. Such an approach seems to presume without question that "hard cases" can warrant exceptions to the general biblical ideals of not killing and of being welcoming to life

in the womb.

Now, however, let us look more specifically at the biblical evidence and perspective that can ground the various arguments or exhortations we might make in our prolife presentations.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN BEINGS AND LIFE

My presentation of this perspective will not follow most of the standard treatments of biblical ethics and morality. Many of these conventional approaches tend to treat standard topics like the ten commandments, the love commandment, or what the Bible says about subjects like sexuality or life issues.^{iv} Some provide overviews of New Testament or Old Testament moral teaching.^v

This presentation will propose a more inclusive canonical horizon (and yet a more instinctive one), one grounded more simply in a typical biblical world view of first-century Christians. Instead of focusing narrowly on explicit issues, cases, laws, or commands, we will be able to situate particular issues within this biblical and Jewish worldview as lived and further developed by Christians. As is clear from both Jesus's teaching and example in the Gospels, and from letters and other New Testament writings, early Christians generally took over the biblical worldview from Judaism, but with a special concentration on how the risen Jesus influenced this perspective.

Thus early Christians viewed the world and life from their (Jewish) biblical perspective. Their world was ruled by the one and only God, who created the universe good (not evil, as for some gnostics), and who created humans "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27 RSV). To these humans God gave dominion over the rest of material creation, but a dominion subordinate to that of their Creator. This perspective on the goodness of God's original creation, and on a genuine but qualified human authority over other material creatures, is straightaway tempered by the awareness of human sin and the skewing of the relationships between humans and God, among themselves and with other creatures. The history and condition of sinful human rebellion from God's ways radically modified the moral universe in which

humans found themselves. Some things proper to their original state (e.g., the innocent nakedness of Adam and Eve) were no longer appropriate (thus their clothing themselves out of shame).

This biblical perspective is based on belief not only in creation and sin but also in God's rescuing humans from the consequences of sin, as he did through the exodus from Egypt, through salvation from foreign oppression by the instrumentality of judges and kings, and through the covenants between God and the chosen people. This biblical worldview delineates God's teaching and disciplining this people throughout the ages, and progressively revealing his identity and will, especially through commandments and laws, through positive and negative examples of behavior in the Pentateuch and historical books, and through exhortations of prophets and reflections of wisdom writers.

For Christians, this worldview is further transformed through their understanding of biblical history and revelation from the perspective of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, through their reception of the Holy Spirit, and through their life within the Church. Yet the New Testament view remains more in a basic continuity with the theological and moral horizons of their Jewish scriptures than in their revocation or replacement. Fundamental biblical moral principles remain in effect, such as the goodness of material creation (and thus of material goods and sexuality), the need to obey their Creator and to repent of their sins. Many biblical laws and directives also retained their force, such as the Ten Commandments and their epitome in the love of God and neighbor. Even when Jesus is portrayed as modifying received moral tradition, as in his rejection of divorce, his changes are often based on how things were "from the beginning" (Mark 10:2-9; Matt 19:3-6), i.e., on the order of creation in the Torah.^{vi}

GENESIS: CREATION OF HUMANS IN DOMINION OVER THE EARTH

Especially as an antidote to proof-texting and special pleading, the enduring authority (for biblical ethical judgments) of the Genesis (and Pentateuch) account of the creation, fall, and God's plan of

salvation through his people needs to be acknowledged. The Genesis portrayal of the place and role of humans in the material universe carefully balances human authority over all other material creatures with unambiguous limits to this authority. Human dominion over the earth is delegated and finite. Humans are stewards, not owners or masters, of the earth and its creatures. Their authority is exercised not in their own name but as representatives of God. They are held accountable by the Creator for how they exercise this God-given authority. Thus, the portrayal of Adam as naming the animals and of the first couple as tending the garden of Eden under the friendship and supervision of God their Creator (Genesis 2) provide a powerful foundational symbol for the biblical principles regarding proper use of animals and material goods, as well as respect for the environment. Later laws of the Israelites build on this foundation, such as those that forbid cruelty to animals and enjoin consideration for them (e.g., “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” (Deut 25:4).^{vii}

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Especially foundational for biblical ethics, particularly concerning human rights and life issues, is the Genesis portrayal of humans as created in the image of God. After creating the animals (and declaring them good and therefore worthy of respect and proper treatment), God is depicted as saying, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion” over the other living things in the sea and air and on the earth (Gen 1:26 RSV). It is as God’s image that humans have dominion. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27 RSV). This notion of humans in God’s image is vigorously reinforced within the biblical worldview by the popular and frequently quoted Ps. 8: “What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the

field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea” (Ps 8:4-8 RSV).

In Genesis the Creator is then shown blessing these creatures who were newly created in the divine image and likeness: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1:28 RSV). As frequently in the Jewish Scriptures, a blessing by God or by a parent or grandparent can also comprise the person’s vocation.^{viii} Here in the creation account, God’s human images are called first, to propagate the human race throughout the world, and second, to subdue the world and all that is in it. This two-part commission, which is repeated in even more radical form in their post-flood authorization, forms the basis for many of the later biblical commandments and ethical directives.

Whereas the account apparently presumes that other material creatures will reproduce themselves according to their natural instincts and of necessity, without need for any explicit divine directive, human sexual activity and reproduction is from the beginning treated as freely chosen activity which God has to guide through commandments and directions for humans to follow. A component of the human task of subduing and having dominion over the world and of creatures in it is their God-given commission of propagating their race throughout the world. Since propagation is mentioned first, one can argue that it is even the most important component of their two-part commission of subduing the world.

As images of God, and as commissioned by God, humans are indisputably placed at the top of the biblical hierarchy of material creatures. To fulfill their mission as God’s stewards to manage the material world and all the living creatures in it, the original couple obviously has to extend their presence throughout this world, which is done through propagating their race according to God’s command. The biblical worldview has no room for a radical ecology that would advocate killing or even avoiding human offspring for the sake of the ecological environment. On

the other hand, the biblical worldview likewise has no room for irresponsible pollution and destruction of the environment out of selfishness and greed, for God had pronounced that environment “good” upon creating it and had commissioned his images to care for that environment as his deputies and stewards. In this symbolic foundation for the rest of the biblical narratives and laws, the owner and principal master of the world is not humans, who are merely God’s stewards and surrogate caretakers over other creatures, but God.

SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: HUMAN RIGHTS AND KILLING

Since this biblical worldview clearly places humans at the pinnacle of God’s creation as the only material creatures who are said to be in God’s image, and as having dominion over other creatures on earth, it accords humans a unique status among this world’s creatures. Human dominion over plants and animals and their commission to fill and subdue the earth implies indisputable human prerogatives over other material creatures, including rights that are distinctive to humans alone on the earth. Although life itself is obviously a gift from God, after God has given that gift so that now a human life has begun, that human is protected by God against murder and other forms of abuse and oppression by his or her right to life which results from his or her being an image of God. Thus in Genesis 4, Abel’s blood shed in murder cries out for retribution, and Cain is severely punished (though protected from revenge killing by others) for murdering Abel his brother.

Even when the Bible permits the killing of animals (e.g., in Genesis 8-9 for sacrifices or food), murder (the killing of *innocent* human life) in all its variations is and remains forbidden (e.g., Gen 9:5-6) throughout both testaments of the Bible, for later generations most prominently in the Decalogue’s commandment, “You shall not kill” (Exod. 20:13 RSV). Well before the Decalogue was given, however, already in the “second beginning” after the flood, God’s renewed prohibition of the shedding of human blood is based on the foundational truth of human creation: “for God

made man in his own image” (Gen 9:6 RSV). The expressed reason why humans may not be killed is that they are in God’s image; moreover, they persist in God’s image, even after the biblical narration of the destruction of most of the sinful human race through the flood. The gravity of God’s commandment not to shed innocent human blood is accentuated by the severity of the punishment for doing so (i.e., death), ironic though this may sound to contemporary sensitized ears, accustomed to hearing of the evils of capital punishment.

In fact, the fundamental and categorical biblical distinction between killing *innocent* human life and killing the guilty could not be more obviously worded than by this primeval commandment: “For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed*; for God made man in his own image” (Gen 9:5-6 RSV, emphasis added). The way that the Bible underlines the gravity of the commandment not to kill another human is to threaten the penalty of capital punishment for doing so. Although *Evangelium Vitae* and the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now argue against the need or propriety of capital punishment in virtually any contemporary circumstance, the biblical tradition and practice of both Jews and Christians (and, in fact, most nations) from ancient times to almost the present make clear that there remains a radical distinction between killing innocent human life and punishing those who do so with their own death.

Nevertheless, the Catholic magisterium (and facets of Catholic tradition) prevent Catholics from simply quoting the words of Scripture to settle a question like capital punishment today, even though it is explicitly (and frequently) enjoined by the Bible as punishment for grave offenses. Still, the evidence of Scripture and Catholic tradition through the centuries is overwhelming that one cannot simply equate the evil of capital punishment with the evil of shedding innocent human blood, as in murder or abortion. “Seamless garment” arguments cannot cancel out as equally

objectionable one candidate's position in favor of capital punishment with the opposing candidate's position in favor of abortion. The shedding of innocent human blood (as in abortion) is *absolutely* prohibited; not so capital punishment, which originally was even *prescribed* to redress the disorder of murder (see CCC 2266, and perhaps also as a deterrent to murder), and against which recent arguments are instead relative to the circumstances.

ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE WORD BECOMING FLESH

Although Christians build their ethics on the foundation of the Jewish Scriptures, an important dimension is added in the New Testament horizon of the Word having become flesh, the Son of God having become incarnated as man like us in all things but sin.

Not only does the Son of God's deigning to enter the human condition and "become flesh" confirm the goodness of material creation and the dignity of the human creature revealed by Genesis and the rest of the Jewish Scriptures. The New Covenant also delineates a New Adam and a New Creation, an elevation of our human condition and added power from the indwelling Holy Spirit and within the community of Christ's Church to live God's commandments more fully. Matthew's Gospel symbolizes this new level of expectation in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, where Old Testament commandments are said to be re-interpreted and radicalized, not abolished: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17 RSV). The very first example of this fulfilling of the old law concerns "You shall not kill.... But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (Matt 5:22 RSV). Other words of Jesus call for non-retaliation and "turning the other cheek" (Matt 5:38-39). Not only do the Old Testament commandments, like those against shedding innocent human blood, continue to be observed by Christians, but the sayings of Jesus further radicalize and extend them beyond physical acts of killing even into angry attitudes and into non-retaliation.

At least as important as the sayings of Jesus for Christian ethics is his example. Paul looked to Christ Jesus, Son of God, as a living example of how to live. He counseled his communities to “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1, RSV). He asked the Philippians to “[h]ave this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8 RSV). Not only do Christians continue to obey the Ten Commandments, but they are to obey them even more radically in imitation of the God made man, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. This obedience is to extend far beyond the performance of God’s commandments into self-sacrificial obedience even “unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Thus, whereas Old Testament texts have many pragmatic directives for an actual nation state (Israel), in which the prohibition against killing humans is not applied to divinely sanctioned wars nor to redressing seriously evil deeds, the New Testament example and words of Jesus lead to much more radical and complete rejection of killing, at times even of apparently legitimate forms of self-defense. The portrayal of even Jesus’s disciples as dismayed by some of his sayings, such as his absolute prohibition of remarriage after divorce, indicates an awareness even by the New Testament authors and their first readers that following Jesus not only includes a persisting obedience to the Ten Commandments, but asks for sometimes heroic obedience beyond what was commonly envisaged in the Judaism of their time. Followers of Jesus are to avoid anger as well as murder, to turn the other cheek, to avoid not only adultery but even looking with lust, to forego remarriage after divorce, to sell all and follow Jesus if one wants to be perfect (beyond just keeping the commandments), and other demands that sound “unrealistic.”

However, the New Testament does not focus only on the

example of Jesus as New Adam and on his sayings which expand the limits of commonly accepted demands of the Jewish scriptures. To do so might discourage more than promote additional heroic obedience and virtue. In the Gospels Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to empower his followers. The Acts of the Apostles and New Testament letters and Revelation presume the current and almost omnipresent *action of the Spirit* within both individual Christians and Christian communities and churches. These books also depict and presume strong communities where Christians assist and correct one another, so that *community support* increases an individual's ability to live the augmented demands of the Gospel. Thus the power of the Spirit and supportive matrix of Christian communities enables Paul and others to endorse not only marriage but committed virginity, not only justice but sharing of goods, not only restricting but completely forgoing retaliation or taking a fellow Christian to court. Other New Testament texts require and even presume that Christians who are helpless, such as widows and orphans, will be provided for. Logically, it would appear that similar care would be expected especially for women victimized by divorce and consequently trying to raise children alone, even if apparently this was not common enough to elicit explicit mention.

In brief, there seems no evidence that New Testament Christians expected to have lesser obligations than what the Old Testament Ten Commandments had required, nor that they would be exempt from keeping any of them. On the contrary, they apparently operated out of a presumption that Christians are to obey the commandments even to a heroic degree, in imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing obedience and empowered by his Spirit and supported by the Church. Therefore, it seems legalistic to argue that because certain sins are not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament (sometimes neither in the Old Testament), that the New Testament does not forbid those sins, or at least that one cannot appeal to the New Testament when arguing against such sins.

An especially significant example is abortion. Even though

the New Testament probably never unambiguously mentions abortion as an example of the command not to kill innocent human life, explicit extra-canonical Christian condemnations of abortion and infanticide, which date back to the very first century, support the presumption that abortion was so alien to the first Christians' worldview and practice and so obviously identified with despised pagan sins (e.g., widespread infanticide) from which non-Jewish Christians had been converted, that the New Testament writers never thought it necessary in their particular contexts to mention it. For example, in their discussion of the Jewish ethical "Two Ways," the very early Christian writings, the *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas*, mention abortion as part of the way of death or darkness: "You shall not abort a child nor commit infanticide" (*ou phoneuseis teknon en phthor_i oude genn_ then apokteneis, Did. 2.2; Ep. Barn. 19.5* is almost identical).^{ix}

In short, although on occasion the words of Jesus disallow a practice (like remarriage after divorce) which Jewish religion had permitted, even those instances are generally either grounded "in the beginning," in the unfallen state of original creation revealed in Genesis and the Torah, or on the "new creation" brought about by the Word made flesh and his death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Holy Spirit "upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17). Not only do they not weaken the force of the Old Testament moral teaching, but they even make it more stringent, even to the explicitly mentioned dismay of Jesus's disciples.

Although there is a new focus and some more exacting demands made in the New Testament, the fundamental world view of these early Christian nevertheless remains that of the Jewish Scriptures, but now seen as fulfilled in the Word made flesh, the New Adam firstborn from the dead, the Son whom God sent not to condemn but to save the world. With regard to pro-life issues, the sanctity and inviolability of innocent human life, even of issues not explicitly mentioned like abortion, the biblical worldview which the first Christians inherited from their Jewish Scriptures not only perdures into the time of the early church but in fact, can be seen as even strengthened. Thus extra-biblical early Christian

uses of the Jewish “Two Ways” ethical theory (like the *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas*) are more absolute and insistent in prohibiting abortion than some of their rabbinical second- and third-century contemporaries.

A CATHOLIC READING OF THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Moreover, if one reads the Bible as a convinced member of the Catholic Church, one will spontaneously fill in biblical silences and gaps such as the non-mention of abortion with fundamental Catholic moral principles and the historical tradition of Catholic practice going back to the earliest centuries. When Catholic readers also reflect on the contemporary magisterium’s re-affirmation that there are moral absolutes that must be obeyed in all circumstances without exception, not even for “hard cases,” and on the principle that “one may not do evil in order to attain good,” they would be very slow to treat biblical silence about abortion or some other significant and commonly treated moral issue as a warrant for discerning whether an exception can be made to an apparently absolute prohibition.

For Catholic readers searching the Scriptures about abortion with such “pre-understandings” from their moral tradition and practice, texts which do not explicitly address abortion can still be quite relevant for illuminating how the biblical worldview and perspective would respond to a question like abortion. Although it is true that the commandment “You shall not kill” does not answer the question whether abortion is included in the prohibition of killing, the commandment does clearly set some stringent parameters for the further argument over what is permitted. Other texts that provide insights into whether the biblical worldview considers and treats the fetus as human can legitimately be adduced to support the inclusion of a fetus under the general prohibition against killing innocent human life.^x

Thus Psalm 139:13-16, by portraying a symbolic world in which God is active in forming human life in the womb, sheds light on abortion, even though it is a poetic rather than propositional statement. Although such passages as this and Jeremiah 1:5

encompass God's foreknowledge of us even before conception, they certainly include God's care, knowledge, and calling of us in the womb, to which Paul appeals in his own case (Gal 1:15). In the further light of the treatment in Luke 1 of the conception of Jesus and of how "the babe [John] in my womb" leapt when "the mother of my Lord" appeared before Elizabeth (Luke 1:43-44), which clearly imply the humanity of both Jesus and John in the womb, it is not tendentious to argue that the biblical worldview treats the fetus as a human person. Admittedly this goes beyond mere historical exegesis of the passage; nor is it yet an argument against abortion; still it certainly provides significant evidence to make that case.^{xi} It is hard to deny that by the New Testament period the biblical worldview has developed significantly beyond the treatment of the fetus in the law in Exodus 21:22-25 as pertaining to property law. It seems certain that by the time of the New Testament, a fetus is spontaneously and customarily regarded as a "babe in the womb" and as a human person for whom God has love and even a vocational calling and plan. If that is so, the step to including abortion as a species under the genus of killing which is forbidden by the fifth commandment is a rather instinctive one.

CONCLUSION

From my own Catholic history and perspective, a not insignificant portion of which is also applicable *mutandis mutatis* to those of other Christians, I have tried to address the struggle of how to use Scripture responsibly to present and defend Catholic pro-life positions. I repeat my conviction that Catholic lay people need not be hesitant to appeal to Scripture in pro-life presentations. My recommended approach is neither proof-texting nor slavish use of historical criticism. Rather, I strongly recommend that we read and appropriate and use the Scriptures frankly and openly as Catholics, at least when addressing other Catholics. Unlike some Protestant approaches to ethics, which insist on more exclusive use of the Bible to argue any issue, including the pro-life one, there is nothing disgraceful about Catholics relying on Catholic

overviews like the CCC and on the very strong Catholic tradition of moral theology and ethical philosophy, as well as on the explicit magisterial Church documents on pro-life and fundamental moral issues, to guide us in our interpretation and application of ancient biblical texts to contemporary Catholic needs and concerns. Using the Vatican II guidelines on how to read and interpret Scripture “in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written” (CCC § 111, DV 12 §3), we can follow Vatican II’s recommended three approaches for doing so: 1. *Be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture”*; 2. *Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole church”*; 3. *Be attentive to the analogy of faith.*

Given this Catholic context for interpreting, applying, and arguing one’s pro-life message from Scripture, I tried to outline a fundamental biblical worldview as a context for individual issues. By respecting the persistent and consistent biblical viewpoint on human beings as images of God and of the consequent absolute biblical prohibition against shedding innocent human blood, we can then without proof-texting discuss the relevance of individual passages that mention God’s care and calling of humans from the womb, and examples of life in the womb like the interaction in Luke 1 between the two babes in the womb, Jesus and John. We can actualize and apply such passages to new and different situations, like abortion, which are admittedly beyond those original concerns and situations discovered by historical critical exegesis. This is one way to base our pro-life presentations more holistically and canonically on God’s broader biblical revelation of the meaning of human beings as images and potential daughters and sons of God, on God’s creating, welcoming, and blessing of new human life, and on God’s protection of innocent human life through absolute prohibitions against shedding innocent human blood. Within such a life-affirming biblical context, it is not unwarranted to apply the Bible to our current situation. Within this context and biblical application, it is not unwarranted to argue from the universally accepted major premise that the Bible forbids killing innocent human life, for the minor premise that life in the

womb is human and innocent and loved by God and that therefore abortion is killing innocent human life, to the conclusion that abortion is prohibited.

Therefore, especially but not exclusively to Catholics using Scripture for pro-life topics, I say with Pope John Paul II, “Be not afraid.” Even biblical texts apply earlier biblical texts to new situations in ways that go beyond the original point of the earlier texts. As are all Christians, so Catholic adults are called to apply the Scripture as God’s word to our own lives and to the lives of those whom we address. Even when some pro-life topics are not explicitly treated in Scripture, we need not be afraid to apply related biblical evidence to this critical contemporary concern. We need not be afraid to forthrightly extend the biblical prohibition of killing innocent human life to killing by abortion, as the Church has done for some twenty centuries.

NOTES

i. For a concise overview, see David F. Wright, "Homosexuality" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, and Ralph P. Martin, assoc. ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 413-15.

ii. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996).

iii. Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 454.

iv. Raymond F. Collins, *Christian Morality: Biblical Foundations* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

v. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, J. Holland-Smith and W.J. O’Hara, reprint, 1965 (New York: Seabury Press, Crossroad Book, 1979).

vi. The very phrase, “in the beginning” echoes the beginning and title of

Genesis. See John Paul II's series of lectures on Genesis in his *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Foreword by John S. Grabowski; Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 25-102, esp. pp. 25-37.

vii. Two New Testament quotations of this commandment continue to treat it as ethically authoritative (1 Tim 5:18 and 1 Cor 9:9), although the Corinthian use of the quotation argues that the principle applies more to human laborers than to animals (1 Cor. 9:7-14).

viii. For instance, to Sarah (Gen 17:15-16); Isaac's blessing and charge to Jacob (Gen 28:1-4); Israel's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:14-20); and Israel to his twelve sons in Gen 49:1-28, "this is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him" (v 28).

ix. Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Paulist Press/InterVarsity Press, 1982), pp. 49-50; J.B. Lightfoot, and J.R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations of their writings*, ed & reviser Michael W. Holmes, reprint, 1st ed 1891 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 252-53, 320-21.

x. Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 446-48.

xi. Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 447-48.